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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the activities, strategies, successes, and problems of diverse school reform efforts across a 14-state sample of community organizations. In 1999 and 2000, interviewers visited over 40 organizations and conducted telephone interviews with dozens of other organizations involved in education reform. They met with directors, organizers, parent and youth leaders, community activists, and other participants in organizing efforts aimed at public education. Overall, community organizers focused on a wide variety of issues within public education. Organizations tended to concentrate more on issues of accountability, the learning environment, and materials than on instructional quality. They had a substantial record of progress, with important victories won in nearly every area of educational reform. National and regional networks played a major role in education organizing. Parents were the most important constituency for most organizations. Many organizations worked in relative isolation. Many applied their organizing strategy piecemeal or needed assistance in developing strategies for building and maintaining a power base. They tended to lack both information and access to quality research. Recommendations for building organizational capacity, creating linkages, and optimizing strategy and tactics are provided. (SM)

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ED 467 358

FROM SCHOOLHOUSE TO STATEHOUSE

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL REFORM

NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

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About the National Center for Schools and Communities

We are a stand-alone institute jointly sponsored by the Graduate Schools of Education and Social Service at the Fordham University Lincoln Center Campus in New York City. Our core mission is to provide data and policy analysis, research, leadership development, and other technical support to strengthen community-led school reform campaigns. We work with grassroots community organizations to address inequality among schools in terms of their educational resources and leadership as well as the broader conditions that perpetuate such inequality. We also evaluate programs and policies aimed at improving educational outcomes for low-income children, with an emphasis on participatory evaluation designs and action research to build the knowledge base, skill level, and political sophistication of grassroots school reform leaders.

Over the past year, we have provided data analyses for parent-led campaigns confronting the equity issues embedded in the distribution of teaching resources in Albuquerque, Baltimore, Boston, Denver, Philadelphia, Portland, and St. Louis. We also produced background reports on various education-related topics for other groups in Chicago, Denver, and New York City. In New York City, we have convened a number of community, youth, and policy organizations to form the Fair Discipline Policy Task Force. We conduct an evaluation of a federally funded GEARUP program targeting a cohort of 2,000 Bronx middle school students and another for the Virtual Y After School Program that serves approximately 100 elementary schools throughout New York City.

For additional information about this study or the work of the National Center for Schools and Communities, call or write:

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

March, 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FROM SCHOOLHOUSE TO STATEHOUSE is an overview of community organizations engaged in school reform efforts around the country. It is half of a pair of inquiries growing out of our Scan Project, which explored the role of community organizations in school reform, and Building Bridges, which develops strategies for integrating the work of different sectors of the education justice movement. FROM SCHOOLHOUSE TO STATEHOUSE summarizes interviews with dozens of community organizations as well as various supplemental primary and secondary printed sources. The companion piece, *Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door – The Community Struggle for a Say in Our Children's Education*, is being released simultaneously.

Our first thanks, therefore, go those people who spent time and shared public and unpublished materials to describe their school reform work and to Thomas Kamber, Ph.D. for taking on the daunting task of distilling boxes of field notes and source materials into a this document of which his the author. Thanks to the Albert A. List Foundation, Foundation for Child Development, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Needmor Fund, Open Society Institute, the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, and the Valentine Fund of the Tides Foundation for both their financial support.

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John M. Beam
Executive Director

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last decade, dozens of community organizations across the country have launched campaigns to improve public schools. Prompted by the persistent breakdowns and inequities of the public education system, parents and community leaders organized themselves and targeted administrators, district officials, and local politicians with a wide range of demands. From mundane concerns about bathrooms and lighting to complex recommendations for instructional reform, activists have pushed for changes to ensure competent teaching in a safe and adequate physical environment and to promote fairness in resources, discipline, and academic standards.

From Schoolhouse to Statehouse provides an overview of the activities, strategies, successes and problems of a diverse set of organizing efforts across a 14-state national sample. In 1999 and 2000, interviewers from the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University visited over 40 organizations and conducted telephone interviews with dozens of other organizations involved in education reform. We met with directors, organizers, parent and youth leaders, community activists, and other participants in organizing efforts aimed at public education. We compiled extensive information and analyzed a range of factors related to the objectives, experiences, and progress achieved by these organizations. This report summarizes what we learned about the efforts that were under way—including issues, stakeholders, strategies, progress, and problems—and offers some recommendations for ways to strengthen community organizing for public education reform.

Summary of Findings

1. **Community organizers focus on an extraordinary variety of issues within the field of public education.**

   Our interviewers identified dozens of issues on which organizers had focused, including facilities, safety, instruction, standards, and discipline. The breadth of concerns underscores the importance of education organizing on multiple fronts, but also highlights important strategic challenges for organizers in terms of setting priorities.

2. **Organizations tend to concentrate more on issues of accountability, the learning environment, and materials than on instructional quality.**

   We found that a great many organizations were focused on making the schools and districts more accountable to parents and communities, along with issues related to the learning environment and materials (such as facilities, safety and textbooks). Equity and educational standards received less attention but were still important areas of concern, while teaching quality and special programs (such as after-school programs) were less frequently mentioned as priority issues.

3. **The organizations have a substantial record of progress, with important victories won in nearly every area of education reform.**

   Interviewees recounted dozens of significant victories, ranging from acquisition of textbooks and doors on bathroom stalls to state bond acts that increased funding by tens of millions of dollars. The scope and variety of progress were heartening and suggest excellent prospects for the continuing role of community organizations working on education reform.

4. **National and regional networks play a major role in education organizing.**

   Organizing networks such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, ACORN, and the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing were deeply involved in efforts focused on education. Their influence was important in determining issues, strategies, and organizational structures. In addition, we interviewed dozens of organizations affiliated with US Action and found many of them had begun to include education in their programs for reform.

5. **Parents are the most important constituency for the majority of organizations. Youth organizations and intergenerational efforts also figure prominently in several locations.**

   Sustained parent involvement was critical to success in many locations, whether organized directly via parent leadership organizations or through local congregations or other nonprofit organizations. Student activism played an important role in several cities. Several organizations we visited utilized an intergenerational model of organizing that included youth and parent leaders in key roles. In some areas, primarily faith-based activists, who were often not parents with children in the public schools, drove congregational efforts.

6. **Many organizations are working in relative isolation, with few effective linkages create across groups, organizing networks, or geographies.**

   While we found important collaborative efforts under way in Texas, Louisiana, and New York, the great majority of organizations we visited had little meaningful contact with one another and were comparatively unconnected with potentially important resources, such as state fiscal analysis institutes, research centers, and funding sources.

7. **Many groups apply their organizing strategy piecemeal or need assistance in developing strategies for building and maintaining a power base.**

   Some of the organizations we visited were applying classic community organizing techniques to building constituencies, selecting and prioritizing issues, developing a winnable action plan, and carrying out actions to force change. But many were not conducting systematic outreach, researching issues effectively, putting together a plan to achieve concrete objectives, or building a sustainable effort for long-term impact.

8. **Many organizations suffer from a lack of both information and access to quality research.**

   We found that many organizers and leaders pointed to their limited access to research as a significant barrier to success; research needs commonly extended from simply understanding local decision processes to accessing state-of-the-art analyses of pedagogical methods.

9. **Most organizations lack both capacity for long-term strategic planning and specific mechanisms to measure progress toward their organizing objectives.**

   Some organizations were implementing well-developed strategic plans and pursuing objectives according to measurable benchmarks, but most had very few financial or staff resources to devote to such considerations and were taxed simply to maintain their day-to-day programs. Several expressed interest in becoming more systematic in their work through more deliberate organizational planning and the application of clear measures of success.

Summary of Recommendations

We limit our recommendations to three areas where thoughtful collaboration with outside groups might contribute to making organizing efforts more effective: building organizational capacity, creating appropriate linkages, and optimizing strategy and tactics.

Recommendation: *Establish a technical assistance and training network to build the organizational capacity of groups devoted to education organizing.*

Recommendation: *Create mechanisms to promote and maintain appropriate linkages between grassroots organizers and leaders, researchers, advocacy organizations, teachers unions, funders, and technical assistance providers.*

Recommendation: *Create mechanisms to record, assess, and disseminate strategic learning between organizations engaged in education reform.*

INTRODUCTION

Tuning in to Education

Before the 1990s, public education was rarely a top priority for community organizers, who traditionally focused more heavily on such issues as environmental justice, affordable housing, jobs, and public services.

In the early 1990s, however, this began to change as community organizations and their supporting institutions shifted increasing attention to the crisis in America's public schools. Angered by the inequities, breakdowns and obstructions, parents and activists began targeting schools, districts and public officials with a wide range of demands. Some of these efforts were piecemeal actions to bring about seemingly mundane changes: doors on bathroom stalls, lighting on school grounds, acquisition of textbooks. Others were part of sophisticated statewide campaigns to change the fundamental balance of power that underpins the inequities and shortcomings found in local schools.

These campaigns were rooted in organizations whose diversity reflects that of organizing in general. Informal groups focusing on just one school might work alongside professional organizers marshalling all the resources of a national organizing network. Regardless of their institutional setting, education activists were raising new issues, challenging new constituencies, and articulating new demands.

Early successes in several states and cities sparked more efforts, and by the late 1990s there were dozens of organizations across the nation where education issues featured prominently on the agenda for change. Too disjointed to be called a movement, but too prominent to be ignored, these efforts represented something of a new stage in community organizing as mature organizations and networks expanded into a new field and smaller groups sprang up and brought new voices to the fore.

But with this newfound visibility, activists and organizers also faced new challenges, ranging from a high turnover of leadership to uncooperative school administrators to violent attacks from hostile segments of the community. Parent and student leaders constantly cycled out of schools, placing new burdens on leadership recruitment and support. Teachers and administrators insisted that community leaders lacked the expertise to assess educational programs. Resource inadequacy reached shocking levels in many districts where students lacked the most basic materials and texts. And with new cohorts of students suffering the consequences each year, a crisis mentality was difficult to avoid.

Still, the work went on, in Los Angeles, Austin, Philadelphia, Jackson, and Baltimore, in New York and Kentucky, Florida and Louisiana, as people suffering under the burden of failing schools and educational injustice learned to feel their own power and legitimacy in challenging a system where only pockets of privilege managed to break up the broad pattern of mediocrity. From improved local facilities to statewide legislative initiatives for equity and curriculum, important victories were won, yet much remains to be done to

consolidate and expand the reach of these campaigns for quality education to reach all of America's children.

The Research

Much has been written on the history of community organizing in the United States, but comparatively little is known about the organizations and activists who focus primarily on public schools. To fill that void, in 1999, we initiated a nation-wide review and analysis of the experiences of a wide range of groups involved in education organizing.

Organizations were selected for inclusion in the study according to issue focus, organizing strategy, and geography. All organizations included in the study have devoted substantial attention to issues of reforming public education, though some treat education as one issue among many, while others are interested in it exclusively. All of these organizations utilize community organizing techniques such as leadership development, empowerment strategies, recruitment of stakeholders such as parents and students, and accountability sessions with key targets. Most of the groups identify themselves as community organizing entities, but some combine organizing with advocacy, program operation, lobbying, or legal strategies.

Our first round of interviews focused on organizations that engaged in community organizing on school reform and was completed in late 1999. In 2000, we gathered a substantial body of additional information through dozens of interviews with organizations affiliated with US Action (formerly Citizens Action) and through an in-depth analysis of the role of state fiscal analysis institutes to understand the extent of their education-related programs and initiatives. We examined additional efforts then under way to promote equitable and effective education, and conducted interviews to explore the possibility of strengthening linkages between these organizations and grassroots organizing efforts in many cities. While we sought out multiple voices and perspectives in an effort to create the most accurate possible overview of organizing in each region, our researchers generally took the interviewees and their materials at their word for their descriptions of organizational priorities, activities and accomplishments.

We took our sample from across several regions, including the Northeast, Southeast, South, and Southwest. We included organizations working in rural areas, small cities, and statewide campaigns. This is merely a representative sample and the absence of any particular group from our study is no reflection on its work or importance.

We visited over 40 organizations in 14 states **(see Table One)**, meeting with executives, staff, board members, constituents, parents, students, and policy experts. Interviews were designed to learn about the organization, its history, structure, people, and practices and we focused particularly on the experience of organizing for reform in public education.

We examined the issues that each group chose, short-term and long-term, from school-specific demands such as classroom materials or corporal punishment to systemic goals that included funding equity and improving accountability to parents. We discussed how

the issues came to be a priority for the organization and how the selection of certain kinds of issues, especially in the early stages of development of organizing capacity on education, tended to provide momentum and credibility to the organization.

We mapped the *stakeholders* involved in each struggle. This process included discussion of key players such as parents, students, teachers, administrators, and elected officials, but also involved analysis of factors such as race, socio-economic status, and social networks for many of the participants. We paid particular attention to four types of stakeholders whose roles are of particular interest to NCSC's ongoing programs of support for community organizing:

- National and regional organizing networks such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), and Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO).
- State fiscal analysis institutes[1], whose work is of particular importance in addressing concerns related to equity in the public education system.
- US Action affiliates who are working on education-related issues.
- Youth organizations, many of which focus mainly or exclusively on a public education reform agenda.

[1] State fiscal analysis institutes (SFAI) typically conduct research into state revenues and expenditures and issue reports analyzing the probable effects of budget reductions in key policy areas, including education. Much of their attention has been devoted to issues of tax and spending equity, i.e., whether state funds are being spent fairly in low-income communities, and whether higher-income households are paying their fair share of taxes.

Table One: Organizations Included in NCSC Study

Name:	State:
All Congregations Together	LA
Alliance Organizing Project	PA
Austin Interfaith	TX
Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development	MD
Black Ministerial Alliance	MA
Boston ACORN	MA
Bronx ACORN	NY
BUILD	MD
California Project	CA
Challenge West Virginia	W. VA
Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together	KY
Citizens Planning and Housing Association	MD
Coalition of Alabamians for Reforming Education	AL
Communities for a Better Environment	CA
Community Advocates for Excellence in Education	NY
COPS/Metro Alliance	TX
Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project	PA
Education Safety Organizing Project	OH
Greater New Orleans Education Foundation	LA
Indianola Parent Student Group	MS
Interfaith Action Communities	MD
Kentucky Youth Advocates	KY
L.A. Metropolitan Churches	CA
Latino Parents Association	MA
Louisiana Interfaiths Together	LA
Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition	NY
Oakland ACORN	CA
Oakland Community Organizations	CA
Oakland Coalition of Congregations	CA
Parents Organizing Consortium	NY
Peninsula Interfaith Action	CA
People Acting in Communities Together	CA
People Acting in Communities Together	FL
PUEBLO	CA
Sacramento Area Congregations Together	CA
San Francisco Organizing Project	CA
South East Community Organization	MD
Southern Echo	MS
Southwest Organizing Project	NM
21st Century Youth Leadership Movement	AL
Urban Retrievers	PA
Valley Interfaith	TX
Watts/Century Latino Organization	CA
Youth Action	NM
Youth United for Community Action & Higher Learning	CA
Youth United for Change	PA

We examined the *strategies* employed by each organization for reaching its goals. This included discussion of organizing approaches and tactics. We asked how constituencies were selected, how issues were chosen, and how the organizations worked to bring about change both at the local and state levels. We explored the relationship between the strategies used by each group and the approaches favored by national organizing networks. Many of the groups we visited have been working on education for a number of years and were able to discuss the evolution of strategies that corresponded to different phases of their organization's development.

Finally, NCSC interviewers focused on *progress* toward reforms and *barriers* to change identified during the interviewees. We asked about victories that were won and the criteria employed to determine a successful campaign or action. We discussed the relationship between broader, systemic, or ideological analysis and the incremental changes achieved as a result of many organizing efforts. And we probed on questions of what challenges, problems, and barriers existed that limited the effectiveness of the organizations and their work.

Since the purpose of our research was not simply to describe the state of community organizing for school reform, but also to explore possible ways to increase its effectiveness and impact, we devoted considerable time to questioning how groups might overcome the barriers and limitations and how national technical assistance providers might facilitate progress. We discussed the willingness of groups to work with one another and with outside parties, considering initiatives in research, training, communication, and coordination that might be of assistance.

Table Two: State Fiscal Analysis Institutes Profiled For This Report

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families	AR
Association for Children of New Jersey	NJ
Colorado Center on Law and Policy	CO
Fiscal Policy Center	WA
Fiscal Policy Institute	NY
Kentucky Youth Advocates	KY
Maine Center for Economic Policy	ME
Maryland Budget and Tax Policy Institute	MD
Michigan League for Human Services	MI
Oregon Center for Public Policy	OR
Tax Equity Alliance for Massachusetts	MA
Voices for Illinois Children	IL
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families	WI

In addition to the interviews, we compiled and reviewed a large collection of materials pertaining to the work of the organizations in the study. These included pamphlets and

brochures, annual reports, fact sheets, organizational histories, news articles, recruitment and training materials, and fundraising proposals. We also benefited greatly from reading several analytic papers written by organizers and leaders which focused on the dynamics of organizing for education reform and discussed key problems and approaches for overcoming them.

INGREDIENTS FOR REFORM: ORGANIZATIONS, ISSUES, AND STAKEHOLDERS

Considering the organizations, issues and stakeholders involved in public education reform in the United States, we are struck by how little overlap existed in the experiences and structures of the groups and the issues they choose. While the list of stakeholders was fairly consistent across geographies, the configuration of organizing efforts varied enormously.

With the exception of some broad categorizations, such as whether an organization was linked to a larger formalized network such as PICO or ACORN, the locales we visited were more notable for their differences than their similarities. Where one city had a carefully targeted organizing effort where local activists coordinated their work with statewide initiatives, another might have had several organizations working with little mutual support or even awareness and no means of connecting to broader struggles.

The range of issues we encountered was even more varied: safety, classroom materials, school uniforms, funding equity, instructional methods—a seemingly inexhaustible list. National organizations helped guide their affiliates toward a somewhat narrower range, but nearly every organization had at least one issue that was unique amongst the 45 groups.

Organizations

Organizational structure, history, and practice play a major role in the character of community organizing for educational reform. Roughly half of the organizations we visited were affiliated with a regional or national organizing network, and this distinction was an important driver of issues and approaches. Other key organizational factors included the role of parents and students, connections to community organizations and congregations, and the age and institutional capacity of the organization. Table Two summarizes some of the key considerations related to organizational factors.

Table Three: Organizational Factors

CATEGORY	CONSIDERATION
Regional or National Network	Affiliated vs. Independent
Geography	Local Only vs. Statewide or National
Issue Focus	Education Only vs. Multiple Issues
Role of Parents	Parent-Driven vs. Congregation/Other
Role of Students	Intergenerational Model vs. Adult-Driven
Religious Affiliation	Faith-Based vs. Secular
Institutional Life Cycle	Recently Created vs. Long-Standing
Racial/Ethnic Composition	Stated Racial/Ethnic Focus vs. Broad-Based

One of the challenges of organizing that focuses on public education is to create models and organizational infrastructure that can grapple effectively with a bureaucracy and decision making apparatus deeply entrenched at the local and county level but also

subject to direct legislative oversight in the statehouses. In only a handful of states did there appear to be robust local efforts strategically linked to statewide organizing.

One example was All Congregations Together (a PICO affiliate) in New Orleans, which had affiliated congregations focused on district-level concerns, and these in turn were linked at the state level via Louisiana Interfaiths Together. In California, 13 congregation-based chapters of PICO joined together in a statewide initiative—the California Project—to secure funding for after-school homework centers. The Industrial Areas Foundation had been effective in bridging the state-local gap in Texas, winning local bond issues and statewide investment funds for educational investment. In New York State, a number of the groups that we interviewed were becoming involved in the Alliance for Quality Education, which linked dozens of organizations from around the state in a coordinated statewide campaign.

Boards of the interview groups typically included any of the following: parents, congregation leaders, community leaders, retired teachers and education professionals, education policy experts (often professors at nearby universities), and people experienced in fundraising. Many organizations placed student activists on their boards as well.

Staffing patterns varied widely, depending on the organization's age, size, and organizing model. Many of the groups employed a small number of administrators (who typically do double duty as fundraisers, advocates, and lobbyists), placing the bulk of their resources into a team that is directly involved organizing and training parents and community leaders. In other cases, well developed multi-issue organizations such as the Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition in New York or the South East Community Organization in Baltimore had simply extended their organizing staffs to include education issues; some of these organizations operated well developed community development programs and had limited expertise or resources available for nurturing an effective program of community organizing.

Organizing affiliations such as IAF or PICO play a critical role in shaping local organizations. Differences between ACORN and IAF affiliation, for instance, lead to distinct organizational arrangements. ACORN groups tend to treat households as the basic unit of membership, while IAF members are typically congregations. Of course, the differences in the networks' primary organizing strategies lead to significant distinctions in how local affiliates operate. At the same time, these relationships should not be seen as all-encompassing: some IAF groups (such as Interfaith Action Communities in Texas) reported an emphasis on parent leaders, even though the core structure of IAF is congregation-based, and not all ACORN or PICO groups emphasized parent organizing or training to the same degree.

Nearly all the organizations studied sought a broad-based constituency, spanning race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and geography. A few (such as Latino Parents Association in Boston) also sought to target populations facing special problems in the school system, including language barriers and racism. In addition, class was a strong factor in

determining organizational membership: few of the groups surveyed mentioned efforts to include middle-class or higher-income households in their outreach.

Issues

Issue selection is obviously one of the most important elements of organizing for school reform, and the field of education provides unusually rich opportunities for creative agenda-setting. Interviewees identified nearly 50 priority issues, and while concerns like parent involvement were important for many organizations, others—like corporal punishment or misuse of Title I funds—received serious attention from just one or two.

Issue selection was distinctly correlated with a groups' level of development and affiliation with organizing networks. Fledgling organizations with small geographic bases and no such affiliation tended to focus on concrete resource concerns such as adequacy of bathrooms and textbooks, while more established groups tackled issues such as curriculum, teaching methods, and system-wide reform. Nearly all the organizations addressed accountability, usually by pressing for more parent involvement.

Table Three lists the principal priority issues identified, grouping them into six categories based on broader themes that emerged in our discussions. "Process" issues such as parent and student involvement in decision-making are coupled with other goals related school, district, and public official accountability. Standards and performance issues, such as test scores and the maintenance of academic standards, were grouped, as were special programs designed to raise them, such as small schools and after-school programs. Equity issues were very important, particularly those relating to the educational environment, including safety, crowding, school facilities and materials.

Table Four: Priority Issues for Educational Organizing

Accountability	**Environment/Safety/Materials**	**Equity/Equal Opportunity**
Accountability: System-Wide	Physical Plant	Tracking/Student Equity
Accountability: Teachers	Crowding/School Construction	Special Educ. for Discipline
Accountability: Leadership	Materials/Textbooks	Bilingual Education
Hiring of Superintendent	Class Size	Racial Discrimination
Training of District Leadership	Safety/Drugs	Budget Allocation Equity
Misuse of Title I Funds	Environmental Hazards	Suspensions
Parent Involvement	Bus Travel Time	Access to College Prep
Student Involvement	Corporal Punishment	More Counselors
	Truancy	Special Needs Students
	Police in Schools	
Standards & Performance	**Special Programs**	**Quality of Instruction**
Reading Scores	Small Schools	Professional Devt.: Teachers
Math Scores	School-to-Work Connection	Substitute Teachers
Other Scores	Alliance Schools	Direct Instruction
Quality of Curriculum	After School Academic	Tutoring
Homework	After School Recreational	
Academic Standards		
Dropout Rates		

Accountability was the most frequently citied issue category. For organizations such as Boston ACORN or IAF-affiliate Interfaith Action Communities in Maryland, increased accountability was a principal goal, part of a careful analysis of the social effects of power disparities. For other, less established groups, focusing on accountability is simply a prerequisite to effecting change within the schools and bureaucracy. Community Advocates for Excellence in Education in New York City, for example, organized around parent involvement before tackling such issues as test scores and use of Title I funds.

Many respondents discussed campaigns that focused on deficiencies in the educational environment and the materials available for instruction. After parent involvement and system accountability, improvements to the physical plant of schools was the most frequent issue we encountered, with nine of the 45 organizations identifying it as a priority. Capital expenditures were also central to the concerns that many groups had regarding overcrowding and school construction, and lack of textbooks was an issue that emerged frequently in our interviews.

The Indianola Parent Student Group in the Mississippi Delta worked on a range of issues that were typical of some of the smaller organizations we surveyed. This organization had just one staff member who worked with a half-dozen parent leaders and about 60 students. They had won victories on increasing parent and student involvement in the schools, reducing corporal punishment and suspensions, and building science labs and purchasing textbooks for a predominately black school in Indianola. They also won important restrictions on pesticide spraying in a cotton field across the road from a local high school. They were linked to a statewide network, the Mississippi Education Working Group, which provides research and other assistance.

Equity issues were also a high priority, with special emphasis on campaigns to equalize funding disparities between poor and non-poor communities, as well as efforts to eliminate tracking or provide equal opportunities to lower-performing students. Southern Echo in Jackson, Mississippi was instrumental in bringing about state legislation that allocated 650 million dollars to schools over a five-year period, helping to break a decades-old stalemate over continued segregation and inequities within Mississippi schools. In The Bronx, ACORN zeroed in on racial tracking in gifted programs, course work, and access to elite high schools, winning changes in testing procedures, staff training, and access to top high schools for low-income students.

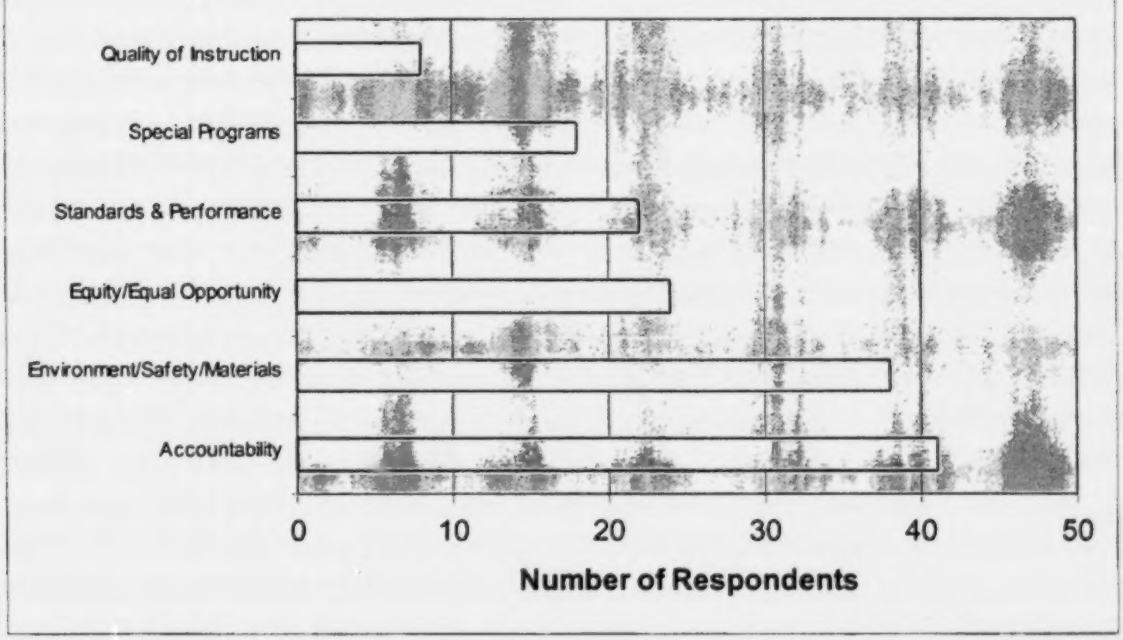
Standards and performance issues were important not only as outcome measures of school success, but also because many parents wrongly believed their children to be doing well in school based on their grades, only to have standardized test scores reveal that their schools were practicing social promotion. Low test scores were a common complaint and overlapped concerns about equitable distribution of resources. However, concern about standards and performance did not necessarily translate into concrete demands regarding the specific strategies the schools should employ to rectify the problems. Only a small minority of the groups attempted to engage school administrators on specific curriculum, pedagogical, or organizational management solutions.

The few groups that played such a role were mostly affiliated with the larger organizing networks such as IAF or DART: In Texas, IAF affiliates such as Austin Interfaith successfully created "Alliance Schools" in several under-performing districts where parents, administrators, and teachers worked collaboratively in a relationship of mutual accountability to improve student performance. DART affiliates in Florida and Kentucky offered additional examples of this level of issue development. People Acting in Communities Together in Miami fought to get districts to adopt the Direct Instruction methodology, which stresses phonics in raising reading scores. Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together made Direct Instruction central to their organizing efforts. Finally, several organizations stressed the creation of small schools as a means of boosting educational performance for low-income students.

These issues all bring organizers "inside the box" where they not only help analyze the problems and criteria for improvement but are also critical to planning what changes will occur inside the classroom. These approaches presume a degree of expertise on the part of parents and constituents that may exceed what many groups are comfortable taking on.

Figure One shows a breakdown of issues by theme, with each bar representing the total number of groups that worked on issues within each category. The heavy concentration of attention to issues of accountability and the learning environment is apparent from the graph, with equity and standards receiving somewhat lower levels of attention, and special programs and instructional quality figuring comparatively low on the agenda.

Figure One: Issue Selection Summary



Why did organizations spend so much more energy on accountability than on changing instructional methods or pushing for particular programs and solutions? Discussions with organizers offered two complementary explanations. To begin with, accountability was truly a "foot in the door" issue that allowed community organizations to gain a place at the table and gain legitimacy for their role in shaping educational policy. Since accountability to parents and communities was rarely being practiced absent a concerted organizing effort, this issue was often adopted first in campaigns where it was seen as a stepping-stone to more concrete concerns around the experience of students in the schools.

An approach favored by IAF groups made accountability a fundamental goal. In this view, ongoing disparities in the distribution of power were at the root of unequal outcomes in many spheres of community life, including not only education but also jobs, public services, housing and crime. Consequently, one of the most important goals was to change the relationships of power that exist in a community such that previously marginalized constituencies wielded real influence over important decisions. For the IAF, this was much more than a transitional goal and was rooted in a long-term strategy for sustaining organizing efforts. Alliance Schools, which involve parents, community leaders, education professionals, and public officials in a new kind of relationship of accountability, were pivotal to this approach.

Issues relating to the availability of basic resources for schools, such as textbooks, classroom space, and safety were a natural place for activists to focus attention since there was little dispute over their legitimacy as concerns for improving schools. In addition, many of these demands shaded into the equity category, i.e., lack of textbooks was not only a basic deficiency in itself, but was also a symptom of systemic discrimination applied against poor people and communities of color to the extent that some communities had books and others did not. Several interviewees pointed out that the students who need the most resources were exactly the students who have access to the fewest.

Notably, the least popular issues among the groups we surveyed were those that focused on educational practices, special programs for raising achievement, and professional development of teachers and administrators. The organizations that focused on issues such as small schools, Alliance Schools, or even after-school homework centers tended to be more established groups, with extensive research capabilities or with ties to national networks. Less established or connected organizations reported more difficulty challenging educational professionals on the technical aspects of how students should be taught, how schools should be organized, and how they should go about raising student performance.

In a slightly later stage of data collection, we reviewed 35 US Action groups. This process suggested that about a third included education issues in their active agenda. These issues most frequently related to opposing voucher proposals, supporting pro-education candidates, and fighting for more state education funding. Funding-related victories had supported smaller class sizes (Wisconsin) and anti-racism programming

(Colorado, Texas). Reflecting their generally statewide, broad based organizing model, campaign strategies of US Action affiliates generally revolved around voter education, lobbying, and action alerts.

Stakeholders

The broad range of stakeholders involved in community organizing for educational reform coincided with the extraordinary diversity of locations visited and issues discussed. The network of organizations playing important roles went well beyond the core players of educational reform; organizing networks, unions, fiscal policy institutes, and other important stakeholders were key factors in many campaigns.

Parents were typically the most important constituency in the organizing efforts. Most organizing campaigns began with a core group of parents concerned about a local school. The Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia was one of the most impressive efforts that grew out of a parent-centered strategy. Alternatively, if the campaign was sponsored by an established organizing network or nonprofit organization, the first step was often to visit with a cross section of parents to determine what issues might be important enough to mobilize them to action. This was an approach favored especially by organizations within the PICO and ACORN networks and had also been employed effectively by established groups that expanded into educational organizing, such as the Northwest Bronx Community/Clergy Coalition.

Youth and student organizing played a role in many cities, sometimes via youth-led groups that worked for changes favored by students and sometimes through intergenerational efforts where parents and students worked together to bring about change. Twenty-First Century Youth Leadership Movement in Alabama utilized the intergenerational model to put an end to tracking in their state, while Urban Retrievers in Philadelphia had student chapters in four high schools and had won substantial increases in funding in target areas. Other organizations that reported using an intergenerational model at the time of our interviews include Southern Echo in Mississippi, Watts/Century Latino Organization in California, and South West Organizing Project in New Mexico.

Congregations played a key role, usually in concert with a national organizing network such as IAF, Gamaliel, or PICO. Oakland Coalition of Congregations, Austin Interfaith, and People Acting in Coalition Together (DART) in Miami were prominent examples of organizations working through congregations for educational change. In addition, secular community organizations such as Citizens Planning and Housing Organization in Baltimore or South West Organizing Project in Albuquerque played critical roles in supporting organizing efforts as part of their ongoing citizen organizing work.

National affiliates such as IAF, ACORN, PICO and DART were very important stakeholders who provided assistance and support for about half of the organizations we surveyed. Within the group of organizations, we studied, IAF was very strong in Texas and Maryland, while PICO had a large number of members in California and Louisiana. DART had a strong presence in Florida, Michigan and Ohio, and ACORN was active in

New York, Oakland, and Boston. USAction reported substantial education focus taking place in New York, Wisconsin, Michigan, Montana, Georgia, and Colorado.

Organizers and leaders reported that teachers and teacher unions played a mixed role in education reform. Several interviewees said that teachers had been supportive of initiatives focused on equitable budgeting at the state level or facilities improvements locally, but many organizations also noted resistance by teachers to efforts to give parents and students a say in instructional methods and disciplinary practices. Still, many respondents reported that they collaborated closely with teachers in their organizing campaigns, incorporating supportive teachers onto boards of directors or advisory committees. In addition, teachers unions and organizations supported statewide initiatives to boost spending on education; in Massachusetts, for instance, the Massachusetts Teachers Association helped found and support the Tax Equity Alliance for Massachusetts (TEAM), which was a key player in the effort to garner state support for school construction and equitable distribution of tax resources.

State fiscal analysis institutes such as TEAM or the California Budget Project tended to play an important role in states' pushing for increased total spending on education and equitable distribution of resources, but they also had some limited capacity for working directly with local community organizing efforts. SFAI in New York, Arkansas, Michigan, Maine, New Jersey, Oregon, Texas and Massachusetts had been active in promoting equitable and adequate distribution of resources to support quality education. Local organizations we interviewed, however, rarely mentioned statewide fiscal analysis institutes as important players in education policy, even though we found many of the institutes to be doing essential research into equity and budget issues regarding public education.

Interviews catalogue an array of stakeholders who were involved at various stages of the organizing process, both as allies and as targets of campaigns:

- Public officials, from state legislators to mayors and city council members.
- School and district administrators—principals, counselors, school board members, and superintendents.
- Educational researchers, including academics from local universities and small research institutes.
- Members of the press.
- Funding institutions.
- Potential allies, such as environmental organizations, civil rights organizations, and tax equity campaigns.

AVENUES FOR CHANGE: STRATEGIES, PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

Strategies and Tactics

Organizing for Change

There was a great deal of variation in the consistency and cohesiveness with which organizing strategies were applied by the interview groups. Some devoted all of their resources to executing well-established community organizing strategies, while others mixed organizing with social services, community development programs, lobbying, or collaborative approaches.

To be as descriptive and exploratory as possible, we adopted a "big tent" set of criteria for including organizations in this study in which groups were considered "organizing" if they:

- Recruited and mobilized a broad base of grassroots support.
- Helped change the balance of power for marginalized constituencies.
- Identified key issues and demands and seek concrete change.

As noted, we did not limit our analysis to groups that comprehensively incorporated these principles, since to do so would have eliminated many organizations employing a mixed strategy combining elements of organizing with activities that fall under a rubric of advocacy or service.

Organizations spanning a variety of settings implemented classic community organizing strategies to great effect. About a third employed accountability sessions[2] or similar events to press targets to support or reject activists' demands publicly. Almost all of these groups were affiliated with a national network or were long-standing community organizations with extensive experience and capacity, such as the Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia or Northwest Bronx Community/Clergy Coalition in New York. Others employed one-to-one outreach and house meetings.

Most of the organizations with which we spoke placed a high priority on leadership development, but often focused their recruitment efforts on different sectors. Groups like Community Advocates for Excellence in Education in New York, AOP in Philadelphia; or ACORN in Boston, placed a high priority on recruiting parents into organizing efforts, training them in the workings of the school system and in key indicators of educational success, and mobilizing them into an effective force for change. Congregation-based groups followed similar strategies[3], but focused more on the community of faith-based

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[2] Accountability sessions are large turn-out public meetings where "targets" (often public officials) are asked to sit in front of an auditorium full of their constituents or neighbors and respond to a list of demands.

[3] There are very important distinctions between the strategies and tactics of groups like ACORN, IAF, and PICO, but these differences are not critical to the discussion here. All of these organizations and their affiliates engage in some form of community organizing.

activists as a recruiting ground. Of course, many of those recruited were parents as well as congregation leaders. Finally, about one-third of the organizations engaged in some form of youth leadership development, which ranged from simply including students in meetings and actions to placing them in positions of leadership and responsibility for tactical decision-making.

Several organizations reported using direct action as a tactic. Youth-led and intergenerational groups placed a particular priority on this approach. ACORN affiliates in particular seemed to favor direct action in the form of street protests and rallies, while youth organizations had staged student strikes, walkouts, and occupations of school facilities to force administrators to the negotiating table. In Selma, Alabama, for example, student leaders organized a five-day take-over of a local school that helped bring about an end to tracking in the state.

Collaboration

Many organizations we studied rarely or never selected confrontational tactics. Typically, groups devoted considerable time and resources to building a base of parent or community leaders and then found local school administrators and elected officials willing to work collaboratively with them to address areas of concern. We spoke with many activists who characterized their working relationship with local administrators as positive. In many cases, local teachers and district officials were well aware of the gravity of the situation in their schools and welcomed parent involvement as a potential means of bringing about change. At the same time, these relationships were varied and dynamic: Some groups started out in a conflict-oriented stance and won a place for parents in educational policymaking, yet found once the dust had settled that they were able to maintain positive working relationships with key local officials. Other organizations had never been comfortable adopting an antagonistic approach to decision-makers and tended to reach out to potential allies, preferring collaboration to conflict.

Regardless of the context, collaboration with school district officials was extremely common among the organizations we visited, with fully half the groups reporting some sort of cooperative working relationship. Often this was manifested via good relationships with principals in key schools (in many cases, schools were targeted by organizers for more intensive parent involvement specifically *because* their leadership was more amenable to working with parents and students), or in a positive working relationship with local school boards or district superintendents. Less common were cooperative working relationships with teachers, which are a feature of Alliance Schools model and a handful of other initiatives; for example, youth activists in Los Angeles and Albuquerque fought for higher teacher salaries. But, working with teachers was more the exception than the rule. Much of this collaboration occurred in an environment where parents and community leaders maintained significant capacity for exerting pressure if need be, and so should not be viewed as necessarily voluntary on the part of the administrators.

Research

Education organizing presents particular challenges due to the knowledge-intensive nature of the field and its participants. Analysis of school performance and its underlying causes is a complex topic, made especially difficult by the often willful failure of many school systems to collect or report adequate data and by the aggressive and intimidating posture projected by many education professionals when confronted by parent and community demands. As a consequence, research into educational quality, pedagogical methods, administrative and budgetary practices, and best practices for improving outcomes were a high but unfulfilled priority for many organizations we visited.

The results included:

- ACORN published a series of locally influential reports on the excessive use of substitute teachers in Oakland and Boston.
- South East Community Organization in Baltimore worked with community groups and the University of Maryland to publish a detailed analysis and set of recommendations for education planning in Baltimore.
- Challenge West Virginia published an extensive analysis of that state's implementation of a court-ordered initiative to create more equitable funding patterns for schools.

Surveys of students and parents played an important role in several cities, including Cleveland, Oakland, and Los Angeles. Student activists with Communities for a Better Environment in California successfully leveraged a student survey on conditions in the schools into a campaign for increased facilities funding.

Programs

Organizations in our study sometimes found themselves implementing educational programs directly, from something as discrete as teacher training or the much deeper involvement required to operate charter schools. Coalition of Alabamians Reforming Education supplemented their organizing efforts to eliminate tracking with a highly successful program to train teachers on effective classroom practices in two counties. In California, the Oakland Community Organization devoted considerable resources to implementing a plan for tying high-school curriculum to the workplace by creating a training program for aviation mechanics.

The Alliance Schools project created by Texas IAF affiliates pioneered a model of bringing parents, teachers, administrators, and public officials together into a collaborative relationship of mutual accountability, but also required extensive ongoing involvement in program design and maintenance by the sponsoring congregations. Austin Interfaith was running youth employment mentor programs and an ESL course for 1,600 adults. Several organizations have initiated charter schools in their districts, making the transition from advocating for change to implementing it at the school level. ACORN in Boston was trying to put together a charter school, as was PACT, a PICO affiliate in San Jose. In Baltimore, the Citizens Planning and Housing Association set up five small schools designed to maximize parent and community involvement. These

charter schools benefited from ongoing technical assistance from CPHA and were a centerpiece of their efforts to improve Baltimore's failing system.

The Oakland Community Organization had extensive experience running programs that grew out of organizing campaigns. Their PICO counterpart in San Jose took a hands-on approach to designing after-school programs and OCO helped win approval for a half-dozen charter schools in Oakland where some constituent churches were interested in developing their own charter schools. OCO Director Ron Snyder wrote a brief analyzing the tendency for many leaders and organizers to become involved in program design and implementation in which he differentiates between program design (a natural outgrowth of research and advocacy), and program management, which he feels threatens the ongoing ability of many organizations to continue to utilize an organizing model.[4]

Defining Constituencies: Congregations and Parents

Many of the organizers we spoke with drew a distinction between strategies that rely on parent- or student-led organizations and those that used other existing institutions (usually congregations) as a base. Parent- and student-led efforts had been very effective in some cities (the Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia is one very impressive example), while congregation-based work had achieved equally notable results in Oakland, Austin, and elsewhere. Considerable overlap existed between the two approaches; i.e., IAF and PICO groups did considerable parent organizing, while AOP, despite being a parent-led organization, explicitly based its organizing on the IAF model. All the same, a number of the organizers we spoke with contrasted the two approaches and explained their own work in the context of how they viewed the strengths and weaknesses of organizing through parents or congregations.

The most prominent supporters of the institution-based approach were organizations affiliated with the IAF and PICO networks. In Oakland, for example, PICO-affiliated Oakland Community Organization (OCO) won important victories for after-school homework centers, school-to-work initiatives, and small schools and based its efforts on a congregation-based organizing model. OCO organizers argued that this approach had important advantages in facilitating continuity over time, since in the parent-centric model many efforts foundered when leaders drifted away as their children left the schools. In addition, they pointed out the strength of positioning organizing efforts with "outsiders," i.e., congregation leaders who were independent of intra-school politics and cliques. Finally, these organizers believed that efforts rooted in a moral values base were more effective than those that rely on a secular values.

On the other hand, organizations such as Philadelphia's AOP or ACORN groups in Boston, New York, and Oakland had been successful in driving change through efforts that created dedicated groups of active parent leaders to fight for change. An advantage for groups like AOP was the singular focus on education as an issue, together with the powerful interest in change found in parents whose kids were poorly served by the

[4] "Reflections on the Relationship Between Organizing and Programs," by Ron Snyder, December 1998. Nonpublished article.

system. Congregations, in contrast, were focused on many issues, and sometimes had difficulty getting their members interested in education if they didn't have children in the schools. These groups sometimes succeeded in making change but not in building power for parents or students through their organizing process.

We found successful organizations operating according to both approaches and generally found organizers aware of the relative strengths and weaknesses of their own models. Whether parent organizing presents particular challenges that can be overcome by the congregation-based approach is an important question but is beyond the scope of this discussion.

An Array of Tactics

The strategies and tactics discussed above hardly exhaust the broad range of tools available to community organizations. Nearly all of the groups surveyed had successfully worked with news media to gain favorable attention for their issues, and many found that fighting for better schools made great copy for local papers.

Some organizations combined organizing efforts with a legal approach, taking part in lawsuits against school districts and state governments to redress inequities in funding or educational practices such as support for bilingual education. Latino Parents Association in Boston successfully sued to force adequate funding for bilingual education programs, while the South West Organizing Project in Albuquerque managed to stave off a court challenge to that city's bilingual education.

Electoral strategies took the form of running favorable candidates for local school boards in New York City (a tactic favored by Community Advocates for Excellence in Education and ACORN), supporting a ballot action in Oakland for a dedicated funding stream for youth programming (PUEBLO), and fighting for bond measures in California and Texas. Elected officials played a major role, both as targets and allies. Interviewees frequently mentioned efforts to work with local and state-level public officials. For example, then California governor Jerry Brown strongly promoted education reform in coordination with organizing groups; now, however, he is a target of some groups in Oakland where he is currently mayor. The electoral role for organizers ranged from running candidates for local school boards to hiring lobbyists and conducting street actions against intransigent officials.

Work with elected officials was not consistently productive however: while several organizations had leveraged friendly relationships with mayors, state legislators and others into concrete actions in support of policy change, others found that a more distant, even adversarial approach was more effective. Nonetheless, groups like All Congregations Together in New Orleans, ACORN in New York, and the Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project reported that leveraging their organizing resources to affect political campaign outcomes could help public officials see the wisdom of cooperating with local organizing efforts.

Letter-writing campaigns, newsletters, forums, conferences, training sessions, integration with race and ethnicity efforts, and site visits to successful model districts all figured among the tools available to organizers. US Action groups typically make door-to-door canvassing (fundraising combined with petition drives) a centerpiece of their outreach and organizing, and education figured prominently in their work in several states at the time of our interviews.

The success of the various tactics is difficult to assess independently of the power base of the groups that employ them. Organizations with effectively organized constituencies clearly reaped better results from comparable tactics than organizations that, for instance, organized site visits to model schools without having the capacity to create sustainable pressure for change.

Assessing Progress

Creating and maintaining objective measures of progress is a key challenge for many grassroots organizers. How do we know we are making a difference? More parents coming to meetings? Success in getting the attention of school authorities? Rising test scores? The fact is, none of these measures alone is sufficient to evaluate success of community organizing.

Organizing efforts are aimed at not only raising student achievement and learning, but also at creating more accountable relationships of power between disenfranchised populations and the public institutions that are supposed to serve them. So rising test scores can be an important indicator of success, but are more likely to be longer lasting if they occur in the context of systemic changes in which teachers, administrators, and public officials are more accountable.

In addition, organizers often face no-win situations where progress on one set of goals leads to new problems on other fronts. For instance, the elimination of tracking in one southern state had negative consequences for integration and overall performance since it led to the withdrawal of significant numbers of middle-class students from the public school system. In another location, successful campaigns to mandate smaller class sizes may have led to increased use of teachers who lack credentials and training. It is essential for organizers to be aware of these pitfalls and to develop strategies to overcome or minimize them whenever possible.

Finally, many of the people we interviewed described a tendency to focus on process outcomes (i.e., the fact that administrators are meeting with parents) instead of performance outcomes (better test scores, fewer disparities attributable to race, implementation of new teaching methods, or after-school programs). People who have a stake in the status quo are well aware that parent and community activism is difficult to sustain. Many groups had devoted considerable time and effort to participating in working groups with local districts without achieving concrete changes on key issues that concern them.

Given these complexities and the relative newness of many organizing efforts, few districts we visited had been profoundly transformed to the extent that parents and students were both engaged and empowered, that students were given equal opportunities to succeed with better-off students, and that high standards were being met consistently. All the same, many important steps had been taken in response to parent, student, and community activism, and it seemed clear that the ingredients for more systemic change were present in a number of places. Concerning the success of organizing around public education, we observed:

- Many very significant victories had been won that may have fallen short of fundamental change but still meant a great deal to students who attended safer schools, had access to new textbooks, or learned in less crowded school rooms. Groups had made progress in nearly every area of educational reform, from increasing the accountability of the system to improving classroom techniques. A few highlights include:
- Louisiana Interfaiths Together won designated funding for after-school academic learning centers.
- Baltimore: Citizens Planning and Housing Association created five new community-led schools that were operating according to best-practices research on small schools.
- New York City: Community Advocates for Educational Excellence triggered an intensive investigation of a failing school district, leading to changed administrative practices and the resignation of the district superintendent.
- Philadelphia: Alliance Organizing Project won significant advances in accountability of the system by organizing parent leadership teams in 15 schools and linking them to a citywide parents committee.
- Cleveland: Education Safety Organizing Project won increased police patrols in schools with gang and drug activity, as well as improvements in facilities management.
- Wisconsin: Citizen Action won a major increase in SAGE, a program to reduce class sizes in elementary schools.
- Selma: Twenty-First Century Leaders spearheaded a campaign that led to the end of tracking in Alabama schools.
- San Francisco: Communities for a Better Environment won increased funding for basic facilities in target schools.
- Louisville: Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together won legislation and funding to pilot Direct Instruction in three schools.
- Oakland: Oakland Community Organization won approval of six charter schools sponsored by community activists.

Generally speaking, local progress on education reform took the form of "immediate, winnable victories" that were critical for building and sustaining community organization but necessarily had a narrow focus. Many people we interviewed saw their education

organizing efforts as still developing, with more systematic and far-reaching campaigns still to be pursued when momentum was built and leaders continued to develop.

A few areas already showed signs of fundamentally altering the way public education is provided, with multi-prong initiatives demanding parent and student involvement, more equitable funding and program administration, and higher standards in schools and districts, while simultaneously working at the state level to leverage additional funding and legislative change.

In Louisiana, PICO organization All Congregations Together was working in coordination with a statewide PICO affiliate to push an ambitious agenda of parent empowerment, after-school programs and funding for improved and expanded school facilities. They created a ten-point education reform plan in New Orleans and put school board members on the "hot seat" in front of 1,000 congregants demanding change, receiving positive commitments to work for the ACT program. Follow-up from ACT was aggressive and effective. At the state level, Louisiana Interfaiths Together was fighting for full funding of the state education system, along with a programmatic focus on after-school learning centers.

California had arguably the most developed statewide infrastructures of citizen organizing groups focusing on education. Oakland alone had organizations affiliated with PICO, ACORN, and the Gamaliel network, as well as strong action from the Oakland youth organizers at PUEBLO, which is affiliated with the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO). PICO had initiated another strong local-state collaborative effort with successful statewide campaigns for school-to-work and after-school academic initiatives, while Oakland Community Organizations was involved in curriculum reform and charter schools. In Los Angeles, L.A. Metropolitan Churches adopted an organizing approach that focused on primarily African-American churches that would not usually be involved in progressive education efforts, encouraging each congregation to adopt a school and provide mentoring and computer training to students. Additional significant organizing was underway in Sacramento, San Jose, San Francisco and other cities, cumulatively leaving California with one of the most advanced efforts in the nation to apply citizen organizing to public education reform.

In Texas, the IAF Alliance Schools initiative had become a national model for the kind of far-reaching change that community organization can bring about. As mentioned earlier, Alliance Schools were based on relationships of mutual accountability between teachers, administrators, parents and community leaders, and freed up stakeholders to pursue the most effective means of improving education of many bureaucratic restrictions that exist for schools outside the initiative. Over 100 schools participated across the state and showed accelerated rates of improvement in student performance. The Alliance Schools project led to changes in educational standards in El Paso, a host of after-school initiatives in Austin, and successful bond issues in Houston and San Antonio.

Despite the aforementioned successes, it is clear that most education reform campaigns were either at a comparatively early stage or were focused on a narrow geographic area

or on a small group of priority issues. Even in Texas, which had one of the most advanced models in place, the great majority of schools were not operating within the alliance model, and much remained to be done to create equitable and successful programs on a wider scale.

Finally, many organizations lacked concrete and specific measures for evaluating progress. Typically, organizations had good information about their own process, research, and policy goals, but were less clear on how to measure different levels of parent engagement and were not systematic about how to measure improved conditions in schools or improved academic outcomes for students. Several organizers interviewed underscored these issues from the perspective of accountability: i.e., how can we hold ourselves accountable to more than simply making an effort...to achieving measurable concrete and sustainable results for students and communities.

Barriers to Success

Organizations with no affiliations to networks like IAF or ACORN, such as the Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia, the Citizens Planning and Housing Association in Baltimore, and Challenge West Virginia suffered from a lack of training and technical assistance. In many ways this made their work more difficult, as they had to continually create new infrastructure to support their campaigns, including strategies for gaining power, research into best practices, and organizational management systems. Interestingly, since they were comparatively free to experiment with new approaches, they also served as laboratories for innovation, though at the time of our research little had been done to capture and disseminate their learning to organizations in other cities.

One of the most commonly identified barriers to success was grappling with diverse constituencies in the organizing process. A number of organizations identified this as a major challenge in their work, most commonly due to racial and ethnic divisions within their parent groups or congregations. Class differences were identified in several places, as was the challenge of working across generational lines (one youth organization leader, for example, was impressed with the tactical capabilities of parent organizers but critical of the incremental nature of their demands).

Lack of access to appropriate research and information was a problem that appeared with similar frequency. Many organizations reported feeling under-equipped to challenge administrators and teachers on questions of educational management and methodology. The difficulty many parents and community leaders had in confronting professional educators was compounded by race in many cases and had been the focus of significant attention in the organizing networks, which typically spend substantial time on parent training and leadership development. Up-to-date research was needed about teaching methods, standards for evaluating students, Title I regulations, best practices in school management and budgeting, and means of raising student performance. Research conducted by state fiscal policy groups did not always figure in the information available to local organizations. In addition, little was known about the strategies, experiences, and successes of public education activists in cities beyond state lines.

Many respondents felt this lack of access to research more keenly when teachers and administrators had extensive infrastructure for keeping themselves apprised of state-of-the-art research. In Oakland, for example, administrators rejected parent proposals for class-size reduction, noting that studies showed measurable benefits only when class size fell below a threshold that was lower than what would result from current proposals!

Information sought urgently by some groups sometimes had little to do with academic studies of pedagogy or student performance. Instead, many organizations cited the challenge of simply absorbing the basic processes of decision-making employed by government institutions and school districts. Officials bent on avoiding public scrutiny often rendered these already arcane processes even more labyrinthine, a problem which often required extensive research by local activists before they could gain access to the system in an informed manner.

Related to the question of knowledge acquisition was the challenge of maintaining continuity among leaders and activists. Educational reform was an issue area that tended to function like a revolving door for leaders. No sooner did parents and students begin to feel potential to change things, than students graduated and the most motivated parents drifted away. Indeed, this was one argument in favor of a congregation-based approach that operates on a longer time horizon. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, at least one congregation-based effort we examined had difficulty time involving faith-based leaders in education issues because most did not have children in the school system.

Compounding all the barriers listed above was the general lack of financial resources and organizational infrastructure available to most organizers. Time after time, we were told of the extraordinary shortage of resources faced by community activists, especially in the smaller organizations and youth-led groups. Access to adequate funding was a serious problem for many organizations, and the consequences were significant: under-staffing led to less ambitious organizing, less time for staff and leadership training, fewer communications resources, and a longer time-line for many projects than was desirable from a tactical point of view.

Other problems appeared with less frequency. Competition between different networks and organizing approaches did not seem to have caused any concrete problems thus far. Opposition from conservative organizations had been sporadic and occasionally intense, but most progressive groups were relatively unaffected by the existence of organized opposition. One very significant exception to this was an episode in Alabama in the early 1990s where an education activist was beaten severely enough to be hospitalized, an incident that catalyzed a student takeover of the schools and helped bring about reforms in the state's education system.

Intransigence and hostility from teachers and administrators was certainly a problem in many places, but generally did not seem insurmountable when faced with organized parents and community leaders. And, while many leaders reported significant and burdensome barriers to success in their organizing efforts, none were despairing of solutions, ideas or optimism.

LESSONS AND PROPOSALS

The abysmal state of public education in many American cities and towns is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the steeply growing intensity of the grassroots response to the problem. Ten or fifteen years ago education was simply not high on the agenda for many activist organizations. Today it tops the list for many grassroots struggles across the nation.

This is the first and one of the most important lessons we take from our interviews: organizing for public education reform was on the upswing in many cities and thus far shows no signs of abating. (See our companion study, *Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door*[5], based on recent interviews with over fifty community groups fighting for better schools.) Again and again, we met with leaders and organizers who saw education organizing as an issue whose time has come. With support from progressive funders, established organizing networks, and researchers and technical assistance providers, many organizations were in the midst of major campaigns to reform public education.

As these efforts move toward maturity, several key issues are emerging as critical to long-term and large-scale success. These can be grouped into:

- Building organizational capacity: Providing the training and resources necessary to nurture and grow organizations engaged in organizing for public education reform.
- Creating appropriate linkages: Connecting efforts across networks and geographies to achieve maximum impact.
- Optimizing strategy and tactics: Searching for the most effective means of leveraging grassroots activism into meaningful systemic change.

In each case, there are important lessons from our research that suggest possible avenues for supporting these efforts.

Building Organizational Capacity

In most parts of the country, citizen organizing on educational issues was at a comparatively early stage when we conducted our interviews, which meant that many practitioners faced a steep learning curve as they created and adapted their organizations to meet the challenges of supporting an effective campaign. Even organizers with extensive experience working on neighborhood, housing, environmental, and living wage campaigns had been finding that the education field presents special obstacles that can tax an organization.

Recommendation: *Establish a technical assistance and training network to build the organizational capacity of groups devoted to education organizing.*

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[5] Beam, Eddins, Eskenazi, Pagen, and Scefonas; *Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door - The Community Struggle for a Say in Our Children's Education*; National Center for Schools and Communities; New York; 2002.

While some of the organizations we visited were very well established and enjoy reliable and adequate funding, most would benefit from infusions of technical assistance and financial support. This was particularly the case for start-up organizations, youth groups, and groups unaffiliated with any of the organizing networks. Many of these organizations are small and are challenged simply to carry out the day-to-day tasks of conducting a modest organizing campaign.

Areas where groups said they could use assistance include: organizational development training, technology acquisition and utilization, communications and public relations help, staff recruitment and retention, development and fundraising assistance, and strategic planning. Many of the more recently created organizations and youth organizing groups were at a very early stage on all of these counts. In addition, technical assistance should be provided from a perspective that embraces continuity; limited short-term trainings are unlikely to build the kinds of relationships and ongoing problem-solving networks that can help organizations to move forward and TA providers to adjust their interventions according to the real and changing conditions of their clients.

Technical assistance providers should especially target organizations in the early stages of development and groups with limited outside support, since these are the most likely to benefit from organizational, logistical, and planning support. Worthwhile assistance could be provided in just one location, but more broad-ranging programs that span a state or region would be more beneficial and could draw on the experiences and models created in one place to support work in others. Areas where organizing has been limited should be targeted especially for technical assistance, since these are likely the most fruitful grounds for programs aimed at moving fledgling groups into larger and more powerful roles. Although less tilled ground may represent higher risk for foundation "investors," it offers them the prospect of actually being able to evaluate the impact of their grants.

Creating Appropriate Linkages

The targets of campaigns for public education reform are often far-flung and diffuse. Actions that focus on local school district officials, to pick just one example, often founder on the realization that progress requires the cooperative participation of district officials, state legislators and education department administrators, local elected officials, principals, teachers and community leaders, often coordinated across multiple geographic jurisdictions. Unfortunately, few of the organizations we met with had organizational networks that span all or even most of these spheres of influence. Many were aware of the potential benefit of expanding their organizational reach, but admitted they simply did not have the resources to build and maintain linkages with groups in other areas or with complementary capabilities.

One lesson we draw from our research is the enormous untapped potential of connections between existing organizations that have overlapping or complementary goals and strategies, but little interaction or mutual awareness. We found organizations unaware of

the work of potential allies within their own cities and states, activists in need of research that had no relationships to relevant local university-based research activities, and state-wide advocacy organizations that had few connections with grassroots campaigns that could benefit greatly from their insights and assistance.

This is not to overstate the potential for achieving collaboration where there are sometimes real differences or limitations standing in the way; different organizing networks and groups have distinct methodologies and it is not uncommon to find divisions that are unlikely to be overcome in the near future, regardless of the strategic advantage to be achieved. All the same, our investigations suggest that the relationship building between entities committed to education reform is not currently assigned the priority that its potential benefit would indicate.

Recommendation: *Create mechanisms to promote and maintain appropriate linkages between grassroots organizers and leaders, researchers, advocacy organizations, teachers unions, funders and technical assistance providers.*

Here are some key areas where linkages could be strengthened in the short term:

- Between jurisdictions: Organizations typically collaborated across cities and between city- and state-level efforts when they belong to the same network (IAF, DART, PICO, etc.), but there was generally little mutual awareness or collaboration otherwise. Efforts were under way in Boston and New York, among other locales, to bring together complementary efforts in a coordinated manner; these initiatives were very promising and should be considered potential models for replication.
- Between state fiscal analysis institutes and local organizing campaigns: One of the most consistent findings that emerged from our conversations with state-wide fiscal analysis institutes is their interest in building stronger ties to local grassroots organizers working on public education. Fiscal policy groups in nearly a dozen states have very well developed initiatives focusing on education, but nearly all of them said they would welcome opportunities to improve awareness of their work among local organizers and to create dialogue with community leaders.
- Between potential allies: Parents and students, universities, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, statewide coalitions, environmental and racial justice organizations, tax equity advocates, national research centers, funding institutions—these are all potential allies in the fight for public education reform and many go untapped simply due to lack of outreach and awareness. In many cases, collaboration between more established organizations and smaller groups can help older organizations connect to new constituencies while their less developed counterparts benefit from the legitimacy and experience of their partner.
- Between research and organizing efforts: Several organizing groups have teamed up with local professors and university centers to bolster their analysis of the educational environments in their cities and states, but many more said they would greatly benefit from improved access to research on key topics of concern. Academic researchers do not appear to distribute their findings widely within the advocacy community, and

few organizations have the resources, skills, or connections to seek out relevant academic research.

One effort that is under way in New York state presents a very promising model: the Alliance for Quality Education is a joint project of New York Citizen Action, ACORN, the state Fiscal Policy Institute, and dozens of other organizations that include the teachers union, local grassroots groups, policy advocacy organizations, and progressive organizations working on related issues like immigrants rights. The Alliance originally organized to work toward implementation of the favorable court decision in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity suit. The AQE is focused on increasing overall funding for education, reducing class size, and improving teacher quality and school facilities.

The scale of these linkages can range from the modest to the ambitious. Effective work is being done in several cities to bring disparate groups together. One-to-one connections between organizations and, for instance, local universities are potentially very fruitful at any level. At the same time, regional or even national efforts could achieve concrete results if they focus on areas like disseminating research and promoting best practices. Coalition-building efforts that attempt to organize on the national scale are not likely to succeed until more work is done to strengthen local, state, and regional relationships among the stakeholders. Building these linkages is easier in some cases than in others, but success in this area is likely to take place in a context of a variety of ongoing programs such as conferences, site visits, funding initiatives, collaborative or coordinated campaigns, and the creation of a communications infrastructure.

Optimizing Strategy and Tactics

We found wide variation in the levels of strategy development across the groups we surveyed. Some, like Austin Interfaith or the Oakland Community Organization, benefited from many years of experience as well as a paid staff of field directors or campaign consultants. Others, however, evidenced a limited strategic analysis and a constrained set of tactics to move their agendas forward. At the same time, these organizations typically recognized their limitations and welcomed opportunities for enhancing their skill-sets.

The learning and application of effective organizing strategy and techniques can help organizations pursue a rational plan of attack for their school reform campaigns, with the corollary benefits of achieving goals faster, strengthening the commitment of leaders and allies, building stronger and more effective staff, and attracting and using financial resources more effectively. While no strategy is equally effective across all geographies and issue areas, education reformers can learn a great deal from studying and discussing approaches that have proven successful in other environments.

Strategic learning is not limited to new or small organizations: some of the most experienced and effective organizers we interviewed expressed interested in exploring outside analyses and models for formulating and evaluating strategy. One prominent organizer explained that this could be part of a process of "asking tough questions" and

maintaining accountability. For less established organizations, of course, developing a more informed understanding of organizing strategy can lead to more judicious issue selection, better targeting in campaigns, and a more consistent acquisition of power resources to bring about reform.

Recommendation: *Create mechanisms to record, assess, and disseminate strategic learning between organizations engaged in education reform.*

- Different organizations require different levels of strategic analysis, ranging from how to identify stakeholders and build a power organization to techniques for sustaining a campaign over the long-term and growing into new geographic areas. Top-line strategic concerns identified in our interviews include:
- Developing constituencies: Identifying core stakeholders, building effective coalitions, and working across race and class boundaries.
- Building a power base: Understanding organizational options, recruiting and training organizers, raising funds, and reaching out to stakeholders.
- Identifying issues: Working with constituents on issue selection, conducting research, and understanding which issues are appropriate as campaigns develop and grow.
- Campaigns and tactics: Articulating demands, choosing targets, developing allies, creating effective actions, holding officials accountable for results.
- Sustaining momentum: Working with parents and students over the long run, handling organizer and leader overload, and maintaining funding sources.
- Handling growth: Understanding the consequences of running programs, expanding geographic reach, building "second-generation" leadership, and leveraging early victories into systemic change.

If these expressed needs sound like Organizing 101, they should remind us that for all its idiosyncrasies as an organizing priority, the fight for school reform is still about demanding a redistribution of resources and decision making control, building a base with an investment in that redistribution, and mobilizing that base to amass the power necessary to force the desired redistribution. The organizations that have been fighting for public education reform represent an excellent resource for showcasing winning strategies. Mechanisms for building strategic capacity should incorporate case studies of best practices, which can initially be shared through reports and conferences, but should eventually be translated into a curriculum for training. Several of the organizations we visited described efforts to learn from strategies and tactics employed in other cities and by other organizations, but in most cases their attempts were limited and often faltered due to limited access to information and competing demands for time and resources. Access to comprehensive and systematic information about effective strategies for education organizing would be of substantial benefit to these groups.

Conclusion

Public schools fail to educate children when they operate in an environment of chronic under-funding; inequitable allocation of resources; lack of accountability for teachers, administrators, and district officials; and limited application of research in pedagogy and supplemental programs. With such deep-seated problems to address, grassroots organizing for public education reform is still at an early stage in transforming a system that fails so many of our children. But, as this report indicates, powerful efforts that have made significant progress are under way in many parts of the country. Based on interviews conducted within the last several months, *Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door*, the companion study to this one, documents that many of the groups interviewed here and others remain committed to high quality public schools for all even as they struggle to develop the strategies that will make those schools happen and ensure that they last.

These reform efforts have been responsible for developing some of the most effective solutions that have been employed, and campaigns led by parents, students and community leaders have been a major force for disseminating constructive ideas across local and state boundaries. From Alliance Schools in Texas to after-school centers and home visits in California to community controlled "small" schools in New York and Baltimore, promising initiatives are showing results, and dozens of organizations are working hard to replicate these efforts in new places and more comprehensive ways.

Such progress is encouraging but still falls far short of the goal of holding our public education system universally accountable for providing quality education to every child in every school. Given the existence of an extensive if under connected base of grassroots groups working in nearly every state, what is needed today is a program for consolidating, expanding, and sustaining the best work that is under way. Training, funding initiatives, linkages, and ongoing technical assistance are essential for spreading currently successful models, for supporting newer or less developed organizations, and for promoting sustainable and systemic change that drives beyond local and state boundaries.

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